

# Bolton: China, Russia, Iran, And North Korea Are All Meddling In 2018 Election



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NEW: National security adviser John Bolton says in addition to Russia, there's "sufficient national security concern" that China, Iran, and North Korea are meddling in the 2018 U.S. elections.

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National security adviser John Bolton says in addition to Russia, there's "sufficient national security concern" that China, Iran, and North Korea are meddling in the 2018 U.S. elections.

"Those are the four countries that we're most concerned about," he said in an interview with ABC's Martha Raddatz.

Full interview followed by transcript:

JOHN BOLTON, NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR: Well, this is a decision for the president. It's something that I think was originally suggested by Senator Rand Paul, perhaps others. I was aware of it, along with I think most of the president's other senior national security advisors a few weeks ago. He obviously made his decision and we go on from there.

RADDATZ: He cited his authority to protect the nation's classified information as a reason and also referred to Brennan's — what he called erratic behavior, wild outbursts on the Internet and television.

Brennan has been a strong critic of the administration. But what does this have to do with protecting classified information?

BOLTON: Well, you know, I think Senator Richard Burr, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, whom I don't think anybody could excuse of being a gofer for the Trump administration, had some very trenchant observations on

Brennan's behavior since he left with CIA, and I think also on his behavior while he was at the CIA. It was my view at the time that he and others in the Obama administration were politicizing intelligence. I think that's a very dangerous thing to do.

And I think especially for senior intelligence officials, career intelligence officials who come out of the government, to keep that wall of separation between intelligence policy. And I don't think Brennan has follow that and, you know, whether he actually used classified information, I think people will be able to determine. But I think that's a serious problem.

RADDATZ: Are there any specific examples that you think he used classified intelligence...

BOLTON: No, but I think there is a...

RADDATZ: ... to politicize?

BOLTON: There is a line and somebody can cross it. I know from my own experience in the Bush administration after I left, I was accused by a senior State Department official of criticizing the administration's policy on North Korea and using classified information.

And it happened he was half right, I was criticizing the Bush administration, but I was not using classified information. Had I been, it would have been a different story.

RADDATZ: I assume that John Brennan says the same thing, that he didn't use classified information. You — would you have been fine if President Obama had revoked your security clearance for criticizing him, which you did frequently?

BOLTON: No, because I didn't use classified information there either. I say there's a line and I think it's clear some people can cross it.

RADDATZ: But let me be clear here, you're not sure whether John Brennan used classified information? You have no specific examples.

BOLTON: In terms of what he said since he left, I think a number of people have commented that he couldn't be in the position he's in of criticizing President Trump and his so-called collusion with Russia unless he did use classified

information.

But I don't know the specifics. What I do know is when he was director of CIA, I was very troubled by his conduct, by statements he made in public, and by what I thought was his politicization of the intelligence community.

RADDATZ: So, the line to you for people who should have their security clearance revoked is if they use classified information. But you're not really sure whether he did.

BOLTON: If there's any kind of misconduct, I think there are lots of grounds to have your security clearance revoked for behavior that calls into question your ability to hold the material in confidence.

RADDATZ: OK, just a couple of more on this. The criticism of this move has been very widespread. CIA directors Bob Gates, George Tenet, Michael Hayden, all of whom served under Republican presidents, expressing outrage. They called it an inappropriate attempt to stifle free speech based on political views, writing that this action is quite clearly a signal to other former and current officials.

Are those concerns valid?

BOLTON: Well, look, as I said a moment ago, I've been through this myself and had the senior State Department official whose name I'll let go for now persisted and tried to get my clearance pulled because I had been critical of his performance and others, yes, I would have objected to it.

I don't think political disagreement alone is sufficient. But I think in the case, especially of a senior intelligence community official who violates the separation between intelligence and policy, I think those would constitute grounds.

RADDATZ: But John Brennan could look at television. He can look at open source. And he certainly has testified in front of Congress.

BOLTON: Yes, those are all things that a lot of people who have security clearances outside of administrations do. For me, the issue is whether he abused information that he obtained while he was director of CIA, or they have obtained perhaps erroneously or incorrectly after he left.

RADDATZ: OK, just the last one on this. The president does go way beyond

Brennan. He says this raises questions about the practice of former officials maintaining access to our nation's most sensitive secrets, long after their time in government has ended.

You know that a lot of these people, let's take Bill McRaven, who also criticized...

(CROSSTALK)

BOLTON: I have done that as well. But I think it's certainly appropriate in a time when we're seeing what I believe are unprecedented leaks of highly classified information, to look at the question of how many people have clearances, how many people received this very sensitive information, both inside the government and in the case of former officials.

So, I don't see that there would be anything wrong if it were determined to go that way to review the policies about former officials having clearances. Sometimes it can be useful. In my case, my clearance was active at a time when I was a member of a board of directors of a company that did classified work for the government, and it was felt important that some of the directors be able to access that information.

There were other times when I was a civilian that my classification was dormant, my security clearance was dormant, and I think that's appropriate too. But looking at that policy overall I think might well be a good idea.

RADDATZ: OK, I want to move on to Russia and your trip here overseas. On the agenda later this week is a meeting in Geneva with Russia's foreign — Russia's national security adviser to follow up on Helsinki. Is there anything specific you want from that meeting?

BOLTON: Well, the — the meeting came about, really, as a result of the meeting of President Trump and President Putin in Helsinki. They decided that the two national security councils should get together, reviving an idea of having working groups that was set up by my predecessor, H.R. McMaster. I think I've spoken with Jim Mattis and Mike Pompeo about that.

We've agreed that what we can do at the meeting on Thursday is look at the broad range of issues that might be open for discussion between Washington and Moscow and try and plan it out in a systematic way. So I'll go back and report to

the president and my colleagues in the National Security Council and — and we'll see what comes of the meeting and what the best way ahead is.

RADDATZ: Since the Putin meeting, President Trump has directed you and the rest of the national security team to make election meddling a priority. We have clear evidence in the 2018 election that Russia is still trying to interfere. If Russia, as they tend to do, keeps denying they interfered, how do you have a productive conversation about that?

BOLTON: Well, I'm sure we'll have a discussion about it Thursday. I had a discussion about it myself with President Putin when I went to Moscow originally to prepare the groundwork for his meeting with President Trump. President Trump raised it with President Putin.

You keep raising it and we'll — we'll see what their response is. But it's not simply a question of speaking with the Russians. At the president's direction — we had a press conference in the White House briefing room a couple weeks ago now with myself and four of the heads of the operating agencies and departments that deal with this, to layout at least as much as we could in a non-classified environment — what we were doing.

And there are a lot of things we're doing that we can't talk about specifically. And that includes both defensive and offensive cyber operations to protect the integrity of the election process.

RADDATZ: President Trump tweeted this weekend that all of the fools that are so focused on looking only at Russia should start also looking in another direction — China. Just to be clear, have you seen any credible evidence that the Chinese meddled in our elections in the past or are doing so now? Is this a genuine national security concern?

BOLTON: Well I can say definitively that it's a sufficient national security concern about Chinese meddling, Iranian meddling and North Korean meddling that we're taking steps to try and prevent it. So — so all four of those countries, really.

RADDATZ: But — but have you seen anything in the past, specifically to China?

BOLTON: Well I'm not going to get into the — what I've seen or haven't seen but I'm telling you looking at the 2018 election, those are the four countries that

we're most concerned about.

RADDATZ: And on Russia — you just brought up cyber security — the director of the NSA, General Paul Nakasone seemed to indicate the White House earlier this month that he's been authorized to conduct offensive cyber operations in response to any kind of election meddling. What would that mean? What would he do?

BOLTON: Well, I think it means exactly what he implied. And again, this is a classified matter. I can't get into what we've been doing but it's been certainly a priority of mine to make sure that we're using the full range of our capabilities to protect not just the elections but a whole range of vulnerable systems in the United States, vulnerable to cyber warfare operations in the — in the government and in the private sector.

And I think that's something that's very important because what we want is not war in cyber space. We want peace in cyber space. And to do that, I think you need to establish structures of deterrence so that our adversaries who have conducted cyber operations against us or who are contemplating it come to understand they will pay a much higher price if they do that than if they simply refrain.

That's why offensive cyber operations are potentially so important. If you're simply always on the defensive, you're not going to create structures of deterrents, which is what we aim to do.

RADDATZ: And - and on Syria, the situation in Syria was a topic in Helsinki as well with Putin. I know you'll be discussing that today with Prime Minister Netanyahu especially about getting Iran out of Syria.

Where do we stand on that?

BOLTON: Well I think the - certainly the objective of the United States, of Israel, President Putin said it was Russia's objective is to get Iran - Iranian forces, Iranian militias, Iranian surrogates out of the offensive operations they're in in both Syria and Iraq and frankly, to end Iran's support for Hezbollah.

I think the president's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal has put a real crimp into the Iranian economy. I think they're feeling it in their capability

for the Quds Force or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to conduct offensive operations in – in the region here and in Yemen as well.

But I think this is part of the problem with the Iranian regime generally and why it's such a threat to peace and security not just because of its nuclear program, but because of its military operations and its support for terrorism.

So that's certainly on the agenda here in Israel.

RADDATZ: Do you trust Russia to do this?

BOLTON: Well I think President Putin is very candid in his comments to President Trump, he was to me as well. He doesn't think Iranian –

RADDATZ: They said they'd get rid of chemical weapons, they weren't all gone.

BOLTON: One – one issue at a time. He said he didn't – didn't have the same interest as Iran in Syria. And that he'd like to talk about ways to get out of them. I think it's clear that we believe, for example, on the subject of chemical weapons, as British intelligence and law enforcement concluded that Russia was behind the attack on the Skripals in Salisbury using the illegal chemical weapons agent Novichok some months ago.

President Trump took very strong action expelling over 60 Russian so-called diplomats in response to that. Sanctions have been imposed on Russia recently. We feel very strongly about the use of these illegal chemical weapons.

That's why the president has twice struck in Syria after the Assad regime used chemical weapons.

RADDATZ: Is Assad remaining in power an acceptable – an acceptable outcome for the U.S. now?

BOLTON: Look, the – the interest that we're pursuing in Syria and in Iraq is the final destruction of the ISIS territorial caliphate, dealing with the ISIS territorial threat and – and getting Iran back into – getting its forces back into its own territory.

That's what we're focused on, we're obviously concerned about a number of things including humanitarian situation in the region. We'll be discussing that

here in Israel and - and with the Russians in Geneva.

RADDATZ: And I want to turn to North Korea. It's been more than two months since President Trump and Kim Jong-un met in Singapore. You've said North Korea has not taken the necessary steps to denuclearize.

In fact, there's evidence that they may be building another ICBM. So in your view, is North Korea serious about following through with this?

BOLTON: Well I think it's important that they demonstrate seriousness. President Trump has - believes very strongly, he talks about it frequently that the North Koreans have not tested ballistic missiles or nuclear weapons recently, that they've given back the remains of over 50 American service members, trying to identify who they are at this point.

And I think Secretary Pompeo will be returning to Pyongyang soon for his fourth visit.

RADDATZ: With direct talks with Kim Jong-un?

BOLTON: Well that's what we expect -

(CROSSTALK)

RADDATZ: Do you know that yet?

BOLTON: That's what - that - I think the timing will be announced at an appropriate point by the State Department. But this is to fulfill the commitment that Kim Jong-un made in Singapore, that he had previously made to the South Koreans and - and to move on with the process of denuclearization remains our highest priority.

RADDATZ: But - but what does that mean? OK, before the summit, the administration talked about the goal of rapid denuclearization. Secretary Pompeo has now said the ultimate timeline for denuclearization will be set by Chairman Kim at least in part and that we are now practicing patient diplomacy.

That sounds a lot like Obama's.

BOLTON: Yes, I - I think the idea that we're pursuing the Obama administration policy in North Korea or any of the policies that failed before would contradict



what President Trump has said repeatedly. Let me just say what -

(CROSS TALK)

RADDATZ: Well let's go back to what Pompeo just said.

BOLTON: Yes, but let's go back to what Kim Jong-un said which - which I think is - is of greatest interest. On April the 27th at Panmunjom, Kim Jong-un met with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and at that meeting, as President Moon reported to us, President Moon pointed out that the more rapidly North Korea denuclearizes, they sooner could come the benefits of openness to foreign aid from Japan and South Korea, foreign investment from many number of countries.

President Moon said let's get this done in a year.

RADDATZ: And so you think within a year - is that the time frame?

BOLTON: And Kim Jong-un said yes. So the one year period that we've talked about from the point where North Korea makes the strategic decision to denuclearize is something that the North and South Koreans have already agreed to.

And - and why is that significant? President Trump has gone out of his way to hold the door open for Kim Jong-un, that's what the Singapore meeting was about.

RADDATZ: But how long did you give the North Koreans for their strategic decision to denuclearize? Do they really understand what that means? Should that have been written down?

BOLTON: It's hard to believe they don't understand it. Secretary Pompeo has done extraordinary follow up diplomacy after the Singapore meeting. As I say, we expect that's going to resume in the near future.

It's a hard task, I don't envy him, but he's worked very hard at it to pursue President Trump's goal of getting North Korea denuclearized.

RADDATZ: And we'll be patient for how long?

BOLTON: I think we're - we're counting on North Korea following through on the commitments that they've made.

RADDATZ: And - and I just want to enter on Afghanistan. President Trump campaigned on ending the war in Afghanistan. In October it will be 17 years we've been involved there.

In this last week, you saw the Taliban try to take Ghazni. Since 2009, it's the worst year for civilian casualties. Is his strategy really working there any better than anybody else's has?

BOLTON: Well I think the president's view has not changed since the campaign. I think he is determined to find a way to get a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan. We've looked at several different possibilities to get the Taliban and others directly engaged with the government of Afghanistan. There have been some signs that's moving in the right direction.

We have a new commander of the allied forces coming into Afghanistan in the - in the next several weeks. He'll want to take a look at the circumstances there. I don't rule out that we'd have a change in some of the things we're doing there, but the president's view is that he'll support the government of Afghanistan in its efforts to see if the Taliban are finally ready to talk seriously.

RADDATZ: It must be frustrating for you too, because I feel like I've heard these arguments for 17 years, the same thing, the Taliban is desperate.

BOLTON: Yes, well what I remember over 17 years is the attack on 9/11. And I think the administration is determined that it never happen again. And that's the bottom line is the security of the United States.

RADDATZ: Would you consider privatizing there using contractors instead of U.S. military? There have been some reports about that this week.

BOLTON: There are always a lot of discussions. I find it helpful, I'm always open to new ideas. But I'm not going to comment on what the thinking is. That'll ultimately be the president's decision.

RADDATZ: Thanks very much, Ambassador Bolton and good luck with your trip.

BOLTON: Thank you.

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